

German Chancellor Merkel visits the US

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The most common translation of the German phrase “Zuckerbrot und Peitsche” is the somewhat inadequate phrase “carrot and stick”. After all, a Peitsche is a whip and not just a stick. Nevertheless, this phrase, made popular by the policy of the 19th Century German chancellor, Otto von Bismarck, immediately comes to mind to describe the three-day trip to America by German Chancellor Angela Merkel that concluded on Wednesday.

The US and German heads of state, President Barack Obama and Chancellor Merkel, smiled dutifully for the cameras and heaped compliments on one another for public consumption.

On Tuesday, Obama rolled out the carrots. Merkel was guest of honour at a dinner party at the White House Rose Garden where she received a 19-gun salute and the Presidential Medal of Freedom from Obama. Merkel is only the second German politician to receive the award.

In his speech for the occasion, Obama declared that the US alliance with Germany was “indispensable”. Merkel reciprocated by saying that “Europe and Germany have no better partner than America”. The evening at the Rose Garden closed with a rendition of the song “You’ve Got a Friend” by the veteran pop singer James Taylor.

On Monday evening, Obama and Merkel had dined privately at the exclusive Washington restaurant, 1789—perhaps a not so subtle hint from the US president that his relations with France are currently far better than those with Europe’s biggest economy, Germany.

Behind the scenes more blunt discussions took place in which the American president sought to wield his stick and pressure the German chancellor to take a much firmer stand alongside the US on a number of key issues.

Expressing Washington’s growing discontent with Germany, a member of the Brookings Institution, Fiona Hill, declared prior to Merkel’s trip, “The prevailing view in Washington is that friendship with the United States is no longer necessarily Germany’s top priority”.

The list of conflicts between the two post-war partners is long and growing. In recent years the US administration has repeatedly criticised Germany over its economic policy, and for its failure to back US military strategy—most recently with regard to the NATO war against Libya.

US Treasury Secretary Timothy Geithner has criticised German export surpluses at a series of meetings of international

finance ministers. Geithner has also made it clear on a number of occasions that the German government should do more to stimulate domestic demand and act more decisively to shore up the finances of ailing European economies such as Greece, Portugal and Spain.

For his part, Obama directly addressed the European crisis at a news conference held in Washington with Merkel. The president warned of “disastrous” results for America’s economic growth if there were to be an “uncontrolled spiral and default in Europe”.

His remarks were regarded by the European press as a criticism of the response of the German government in the euro crisis. Germany has been in the forefront of a group of northern European countries arguing in favour of a restructuring of Greek debt—a move regarded by the money markets as equivalent to a default.

The US position is to line up with the European Central Bank to ensure full repayment of international investors with bond holdings in Greece—a stance that would inevitably require Germany to lend more money in future to Greece and other countries, and face greater losses.

The other main bone of contention between the two countries is military policy. For a number of years the US administration and its military high command have been pressuring Germany to increase its commitment to US-led military operations, in particular the war in Afghanistan. Faced with a resurgence of resistance by rebel forces in Afghanistan and growing domestic opposition to the war, the White House is alarmed at the prospect of an eventual German withdrawal of its troops, which could encourage other countries to depart and leave the US to fight the war on its own.

Confronted with a new battleground in North Africa and a series of Arab countries, the Obama administration is insistent that European nations, with Germany to the fore, increase their military involvement in Afghanistan.

For its part, the Merkel government is confronted with huge popular opposition inside Germany to its deployment of forces in Afghanistan. The death of another four German soldiers in Afghanistan in recent days and others seriously injured has only fuelled domestic anger with Germany’s role in the region.

US displeasure with Germany’s failure to fall into line with US military strategy exploded into the open following the refusal of Berlin to vote in favour of America’s strategy in

Libya. The line-up of the German foreign minister with his Russian and Chinese counterparts to abstain on the issue of imposing a “no-fly” zone in Libya was regarded by American officials as a direct affront. At a personal meeting in Washington in late April, US Defence Secretary Robert Gates fiercely criticised Thomas de Maizière, the newly appointed German defence minister, for Germany’s abstention in the Libya war.

Gate’s remarks were echoed by US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, who declared at a meeting at the American Academy in Berlin in April, “The world did not wait for another Srebrenica in a place called Benghazi”. Clinton’s comments were widely regarded as further criticism of Germany’s refusal to approve the NATO war against Libya.

US discontent with Germany also came to light during the recent G-8 summit in Deauville. Obama held personal talks with French President Nicolas Sarkozy, who aggressively pushed for the war against Libya, but snubbed Merkel. Finally, at the end of his brief visit to Europe, Obama pointedly avoided Berlin, preferring to fly over the country on the way to his last stop, Poland.

While economic and military issues top the list of differences between Washington and Berlin, they are not the only sources of conflict. The US administration has been highly critical of German trade links with Iran and has exerted pressure to cap German-Iranian trade and financial relations. Washington has also aggressively attacked the stance taken by Germany on a range of environmental measures, most recently the decision by the German government to phase out its dependence on nuclear energy.

In the event, apart from Obama’s remarks on the European financial crisis, none of these differences were aired publicly by the two leaders during the chancellor’s US trip. Instead, the final communiqués and speeches emphasised that Merkel and Obama had reached agreement on a number of issues. The German chancellor assured Obama that Germany would strictly coordinate its Afghan strategy, including any withdrawal of troops, with the US military high command.

In addition, both Merkel and Obama expressed their support for a united strategy to back Israel and oppose attempts by a number of countries to push through a resolution in the United Nations unilaterally recognising a Palestinian state.

Merkel is under increasing political pressure at home. The conservative coalition led by the chancellor is breaking up due to internal opposition over many of the policies that have led to such profound tensions between Berlin and Washington—the German handling of the euro crisis, plus the government’s energy and military policy. Increasingly isolated at home, Merkel is no doubt grateful for the photoshoots and declarations of friendship from the US side.

But in the longer term, Merkel’s three-day visit will be unable to overcome the growing rift between the two transatlantic partners. Powerful economic and geo-political

forces are pulling the two countries apart.

While US industry and trade have undergone a profound decline in the past two decades, Germany has been able to use its leading position in Europe to expand its international influence. Already at the beginning of the 1990s Germany surpassed the US in terms of exports and is currently second only to China on an international scale.

More recent figures on German trade with the US reveal a large trade balance in favour of Germany, with some US commentators complaining that proportionally (i.e., in terms of country size) the US deficit with Germany is much larger than its current deficit with China.

At the same time, Germany is increasingly directing its attention in terms of exports and investment towards the East and the Pacific region. There it increasingly confronts the US as a business rival. In particular, German business expansion into China has been dramatic. In the first 10 months of 2010, German sales to China were 17 percent higher than in the whole of 2009 and 46 percent higher than in 2007. No other big, rich economy has seen its exports to China grow so quickly in the past decade.

After the destruction of the Second World War, an economically weakened and divided Germany was quite willing to swim in the wake of the US. Germany’s alliance with the West, i.e., the United States, was the main pillar of its foreign policy and embraced by all of its political parties. Now, over half a century later, a new, economically powerful and more assertive Germany has emerged that is demanding the right to choose its own allies.

In this respect, a crucial issue for the German ruling class is the acquisition of sufficient military muscle to conduct a genuinely independent military policy and be able to conduct its own imperialist wars and aggression. The most important steps in this direction—the creation of a professional army with its own military command—have already been taken by the government of Angela Merkel.



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